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The Trail to Bulgaria

An Italian prosecutor confirms that he is convinced Bulgaria planned the 1981 shooting of Pope John Paul II, presumably at Soviet instigation. The prosecutor, Antonio Albano, seeks to indict three Bulgarians, one in Italian custody, and six Turks. In an interview with the Associated Press, he corroborates Claire Sterling's recent account in *The Times* of his still-unpublished report.

The implications of his charges are so disturbing that it is better to err on the side of caution. This is the prelude to an indictment, not a conviction. But if Bulgaria offered Mehmet Ali Agca \$400,000 to kill the Pope, it is inconceivable that this was done without Soviet assent. If the trail finally leads to Sofia and points to Moscow, a superpower would be exposed as having stooped wickedly to eliminate the Pope because it blamed him for rebellion in Poland.

The Italian prosecutor has amassed a great deal of detail linking Mr. Agca to Bulgarian officials. The evidence that they finally directed Mr. Agca toward the Pope is circumstantial. Mr. Albano's careful inquiry into the assassin's confessions took two years. It was meticulously supervised by Judge Ilario Martella, known for his skill in untangling Italy's Lockheed scandal. There is no rush to judgment in the prosecutor's dark suggestion that in "some secret place, where every secret is wrapped in another secret," a politician of great power made a decision to kill Karol Wojtyla.

Bulgaria's vehement denials of links with Mr. Agca do not square with his detailed accounts of

meetings with Bulgarian agents in Sofia and Rome. His story has been cross-checked and, with conspicuous exceptions, corroborated where possible.

Judging by this report, the Italians can surely prove that Bulgaria has been doing business with the scabrous Turkish underworld. Mr. Agca had been a hired killer for the Gray Wolves, a rightist terror gang that managed his escape from prison after he gunned down a Turkish editor. Yet he moved freely in Sofia, and it is wholly credible that he was involved in arms and narcotics traffic.

But proving a connection does not prove that Bulgaria recruited Mr. Agca to kill the Pope. In the Italian prosecutor's words, Mr. Agca is a "despicable mercenary" who has repeatedly lied. He has already retracted his story about an alleged plot to murder Lech Walesa when the Solidarity leader visited Italy in 1981. He admits to having drawn on press reports for key details about his alleged meetings with Sergei Antonov, the Bulgarian airline official now in Italian custody. Mystifyingly, the Italians hold Mr. Antonov because he remained in Rome fully 18 months after the attempted assassination. If he betrays their involvement, why didn't the Bulgarians bring him home?

The final judgment about Mr. Agca's story should be based on Western legal standards, not those of his alleged Communist paymasters. The Italians obviously understand that and also the case's gravity. They are pursuing the truth with commendable restraint and admirable police work,